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ABSTRACT

This teacher's guide was designed to be used with instructional materials, contained in 16 packets and organized around writing prompts, developed and adapted for a research study on informational writing with fourth, sixth, and eight grade students. The guide points out the most instructive method for using the prompts, discusses various methods for evaluating student work, and reviews the effectiveness of free writing. An appendix with scoring guide for writing tasks is attached. (KEH)

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The Effective Teaching of Writing

Research into Practice

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Teaching Students to Write in Response to Informational Writing Tasks

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TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE IN RESPONSE TO INFORMATIONAL WRITING TASKS

Background Information

The instructional materials provided for use with your class were developed and adapted for a research study with fourth, sixth, and eighth grade students. The purpose of the experiment was to test the effectiveness of four instructional strategies on students' writing. The strategy that was most effective was presenting model pieces of writing to students. The other three strategies were 1) presentation of scales, questions, and criteria to guide writing, 2) presentation of both model pieces of writing and scales, questions, and criteria to guide writing, and 3) free writing. In this experiment, free writing occurred in response to pictures shown the students.

The Effectiveness of Model Pieces of Writing

One of the oldest, if not the oldest, ways to teach children to write is by presenting them with model pieces of writing. It is assumed that students somehow will be able to transfer what they see in the model to their own writing. Instruction using model pieces of writing involves connections between reading and writing. Much of what students learn about writing results from exposure to examples (Smith, 1982). Knowledge is somehow obtained from reading the examples. Reading usually gives no clue to the process through which the author works to create the text. It is assumed that knowledge of writing through reading necessitates a directing of attention, separate from that required to comprehend the text. There is little research on how students extract literary knowledge from examples, although it is known that students from third grade up can extract knowledge of literary features from model texts (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1986). Studies which find that presentation of model pieces of writing are effective in improving student composition have several common characteristics and draw similar conclusions. Thibodeau (1964), Pinkham (1969), Andreach (1976), Wood (1978), and Laurencio (1984) all find that teaching with literary models increases students' organization and may result in improvement in the mechanics of writing.

Instruction

You have been provided with sixteen packets. Packets 1 to 14 contain instructional materials. Packet 1 contains materials for Day 1, Packet 2, for Day 2, etc. Packets 15 and 16 contain writing prompts. Both prompts were used in the study and should be appropriate. It is suggested that you use Writing Prompt 1 (Packet 15) the day after the class completes Packet 14. Writing Prompt 2 (Packet 16) may be given at any time, but using it two or three weeks after Writing Prompt 1 will provide a review opportunity for students.

Timing

Twenty minutes per day should be sufficient for students to receive instruction. Twenty minutes should also be appropriate for each writing prompt.

Reading Level

Two sets of packets are available. One set is prepared for fourth to sixth grade students. The overall readability level is approximately upper third to lower fourth grade. The other set is prepared for seventh and eighth grade students. The readability level of these materials is approximately sixth grade.

Writing Prompts

You may find that the most instructive method for using the writing prompts is to:

1) Distribute the prompts;
2) Read the prompt aloud;
3) Announce the time limits; and
4) Encourage students to work independently.

It is now thought that students do not perform well on assessment tests partly because they are not used to writing without teacher help. Teachers frequently assist students with writing assignments. This may, of course, be necessary when students are learning how to write. However, assessments like the California Assessment Program (CAP) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) do not allow the teacher to help the students. It is thought that students' lack of experience with totally independent writing accounts for some of their lack of success on such measures. Although students may be resistant to no teacher help when they are given the prompt, the experience will be valuable both in terms of practice and of introducing them to and/or emphasizing the necessity of their being independent writers.

Why Use These Materials?

Why use these materials? In addition to the obvious benefit of providing instruction and opportunities to write to students, there is the added benefit of giving this instruction and practice to students in the area of informational writing, one of the kinds of writing assessed by both CAP and NAEP.

It is generally agreed that students need to learn to write for different purposes. NAEP results (Applebee, 1986) indicate that students at different grade levels perform differently for different writing tasks. For informational writing, 59 to 65 percent of eleventh grade students write adequate descriptions based on familiar, relatively simple information or experiences. However, only 32 percent write an adequate description of a modern painting. Informative writing that requires analysis is much more difficult. Eighty percent of students provide at least minimally acceptable responses. However, even at grade eleven only seven to 25 percent provide adequate responses to these tasks.

Although it is impossible to say that all students will improve their writing in response to informational writing tasks though use of these materials, fourth, sixth, and eighth grade students in a school district in Southern California did significantly improve their writing skills after using these instructional materials.

Evaluation

You may wish to evaluate student work by grading the prompts by holistic scoring, which is the impressionistic rating of essays for overall quality. "Holistic scoring" usually refers to the process of evaluating written work based on a general impression of the piece, not by enumerating linguistic, rhetorical, or specific features of a piece of writing (Cooper, 1977).

Another kind of assessment is Primary-Trait (Lloyd-Jones, 1977) assessment. Primary-Trait assessment takes into account the purpose of the writing, its audience, and the degree to which the task was addressed. The California Assessment Program (CAP) uses several assessment measures, including Primary-Trait assessment.

The research study for which these materials were developed employed scoring which was generally holistic in nature, but was similar to a Primary-Trait assessment in that the purpose, audience, and degree to which the task was addressed were considered. This means that, in addition to a holistic scoring of the papers, the kind of writing was considered: Who was the audience? Did the piece inform the audience? How well was the audience informed? [It should be noted that for the research study discussed here, CAP, and NAEP, multiple readers scored each essay. Raters were trained to evaluate essays on specific points.]

The scoring system used in the research study is given in Appendix A. You may wish to use this method of scoring since it does focus evaluation on elements of the kind of writing involved (informational).

For Your Information

One result of this experiment was not expected. Since it has important implications for the classroom, it is described here.

The Effectiveness of Free Writing as a Response to Pictures

The reading scores of the students in the study were available from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Students who scored above the fiftieth percentile on the ITBS were called above average readers; students who scored below the fiftieth percentile, below average readers.

Overall results indicated that presentation of model pieces of writing is the most effective strategy. The next most effective strategy is free writing (20 minutes of writing about a picture). Although above average readers improve their writing more than below average readers, for the below average readers, free writing is the most effective strategy.

The effectiveness of free writing as an instructional strategy is probably due to the fact that practice in free writing increases general fluency in writing. Since it is so very effective for low readers, there are important implications for permitting these low achieving students, often grouped into "competency" classes, to practice writing without traditional remedial instruction. Such an opportunity to write may increase their awareness of text production from sentence level to text level.

About the Author

Ruth Knudson received an A.B. in English and Philosophy from Bryn Mawr College; an M.S. in Educational Psychology from the University of Wisconsin, Madison; and a Ph.D. in Education from the University of California, Riverside, where she is currently an Assistant Professor of Education.

Dr. Knudson holds both California Multiple Subjects (elementary) and Single Subject (secondary) teaching credentials. She taught in the public schools at various grade levels and was a Supervisor of Teacher Education at the University of California, Riverside, before receiving her Ph.D.

In addition to being awarded a Presidential Grant for School Improvement Research Recognition Award by the University of California, the author also received the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) "Outstanding Dissertation Award 1989".

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Appendix A: Scoring Guide for Informational Writing Tasks

Informational Writing Task
Score Point 1

1 = Papers that attempt to address the topic but are general and vague. In general, they are not fluent, do not list or discuss similarities and differences, and contain many errors in form. They are characterized by some of the following:

- --Responses that are informational in nature but are unsuccessful in their presentation. These papers include:
  - --Papers that contain sparse responses so that the reader is able to obtain only a vague impression of responding to the task.
  - --Papers that contain no more than a brief unelaborated comparison.
  - --Papers that contain lists of words or phrases.
- --Responses that attend very briefly to the task but do not remain on the topic.
- --Responses that exhibit a lack of control of written discourse so that communication is impaired.

Score Point 2

2 = Papers which respond to the task with some comparison and contrasting. These papers are more fluent than the Score Point 1 papers and exhibit some development of the presentation of information. These papers are characterized by some of the following:

- --Responses that contain somewhat elaborated comparisons and/or contrasts.
- --Responses characterized by limited control of written language. The word choice may be limited; errors in usage may occur; sentence structure may be simplistic; and responses may be awkward.

Score Point 3

3 = These papers represent good attempts at presenting information. The reader has no difficulty understanding the student's points. These papers are characterized by some of the following:

- --Information is moderately well presented. The presentation of information may be accomplished in several ways:
  - --By comparing and/or contrasting the topics to a very limited extent.
  - --By comparing and/or contrasting the topics with respect to one similarity or difference between them.
- --Responses that contain several points of comparison/contrast but have no organizational strategy. The information presented is not contradictory, however.
- --Responses that are only somewhat elaborated but are organized.
- --Responses that exhibit a control of written language characterized by clarity of expression, some effectiveness in word choice, and correctness of punctuation so that the reader does not have to insert or delete punctuation to understand the point(s) made.

Score Point 4

4 = These papers represent very good attempts at presenting information. The reader has no difficulty understanding the student's points. These papers are better organized than Score Point 3 papers. These papers are characterized by some of the following:

- --Comparisons/contrasts are moderately well developed.
- --Responses are well organized.
- --Responses state points of similarity/difference, support that viewpoint with information, and may state supporting details.

Score Point 5

5 = Papers which respond to the task with developed and substantiated points/details. These papers are well organized, fluent, and function as a unified piece of informational writing. They are characterized by some of the following:

- --Responses that are organized such that they operate as a unified informational essay. They tend to have openings, to state and develop a thesis, and to have a closing.
- --Responses that are informational by developing and substantiating points of similarity and difference.
- --Responses that are fluent, contain moderate/few mechanical errors, and show evidence of effective word choice.

Score Point 6

6 = Papers that address the topic, state and elaborate information, and exhibit contrasts and comparisons. These papers are outstanding.
- --Responses are well organized and fluent. The word choice is effective. The organization is excellent. Punctuation is very good. Either mechanical errors do not interfere with reading the paper or there are few mechanical errors.
- --Responses may present information to support a viewpoint and may list, develop, or elaborate multiple points for comparison/contrast.

Name_____

Date_____

DIRECTIONS: READ THE PASSAGE BELOW. THEN COMPARE A MODERN-DAY ANIMAL WITH THE UNICORN.

The unicorn is a creature that may have existed at one time. It is now no longer around. It looked like a white horse, but it had a single horn growing in the middle of its head. The unicorn's horn was white at the bottom, black in the middle and red at the tip. The horn was supposed to be about twenty-seven to thirty-six inches long.

Some people say they have seen unicorns. In 1673 one man said he saw one in the woods of Maine. As recently as 1933, others have said they think there are unicorns around now.

Long ago, these animals were symbols of love and human kindness. At one time, these animals were thought to be very meek, mild, and gentle.

Name_____

Date_____

DIRECTIONS: READ THE PASSAGE BELOW. THEN COMPARE THE SCHOOL DESCRIBED BELOW WITH SCHOOL AS YOU KNOW IT NOW.

Many years ago, children of all ages went to school together. They were all in the same room. This was called the one-room schoolhouse. Since all of the children were in one room, the older ones often helped the younger ones with their lessons.

School rules included the following:

Don't eat fruit or other things in school.

Don't put your feet on the bench.

Don't play with your fingers or chew them.

Don't turn your head in all directions.

Don't crawl under benches or desks.

The children sat on benches in the school. There was usually a woodburning stove to keep the teacher and children warm. The children wrote on slates (little blackboards). If children did well in school, the teacher might draw an "O" on the back of their hands with a crayon for everyone to see.